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BERTOLI, BARBARA ORAL HISTORY

This is Frank Bumgardner with Ms. Barbara Bertoli today, and she is the daughter of Mr. Tom Wright who was the first and foremost employee in Sebastopol of the Petaluma and Santa Rosa Railway. He worked his way up all the way up from one point as a brakeman and a trolley pop, I think he referred to himself as the guy who changed the trolley who make sure the trolley was in line for the next line. He served in every capacity of the railway and I'm sure his daughter will have many views and will help us with insight in the electric runway.

I: Thank you for coming. What year were you born?

BB: 1931.

I: What high school did you attend?

BB: Analy

I: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

BB: No.

I: And you're dad's name?

BB: Tom Wright

I: Where you born in Sebastopol?

BB: Yes, I lived there until 12 years ago.

I: There is some debate about of some of the impacts of the railway. Some people I talked to said that the P&SR did not have very much lumber carried on. Is that true, was mainly grape and other products.

BB: As I recall that's correct. There was some lumber between Santa Rosa and Petaluma and between Forestville and Petaluma. But mostly grapes and primarily the grape industry.

I: Did a lot of the farmers and ranchers bring in supplies on the railway?

BB: I don't think that there was much of that done. I do know that they shipped berries as wells as apples products. I don't rambler anything other than that.

I: The P&SR had a impact on the agriculture industry particularly, Sebastopol fruit. Did any other crops, you mentioned cherries?

BB: Some cherries, but that wasn't a big agricultural industry but there were some cherries and berries because they shipped them in refrigerated cars.

I: that really was the main, the only way to get the fruit to market.

BB: That's right until the trucks came along.

I: So, we are talking about the years in 1904 when the train first started and then it took awhile until the business up. Lets say until 1910 – 1920's. Do you have any early memories had on downtown Sebastopol.

BB: Yes, it was a big part of our community in those days because everybody was proud of the fact that we had a train running down main street and it served at lot of variant and it carried a lot of agricultural products and very important for a lot of people, they made their living in one way or another connected to agriculture and transportation to markets.

I: And so the depot itself would you say it was the central part of town?

BB: Yeah, the depot is where the museum is today. That was the depot where the dispatched orders were sent out of until later years. And then it was on up above that property. But the depot as the museum is today, was pretty much the central hub for the railroad. They dispatched their orders their and workers came in there and signed in, got their salary schedules, picked up their checks, that sort of things. Found out when they were and not to go to work. Pretty much the hub there. There was always some activity around that building.

The passenger service was pretty much obsolete by the time I was old enough to be involved. I only knew the stories and who the people who they brought into town. My mother kept in touch with people he used to be a passenger service. So I only heard those stories. I also took the last passenger train ride that they had for the community from Forestville to Sebastopol

I: What year was that?

BB: They brought it back as kind of an inaugural thing, it to have been about 1956-I think.

I: Do you have any memories of your dad that stands out in your mind as far as his role as stationmaster? What type of job that was and the responsibility he carried?

BB: When he became station master he had charge of employees, keeping their work records and dispatching orders between stations, and call when trains would be coming in and estimated time of arrival. How many cars there were and what the tier was on the fruit, meaning the net weight of the fruit that kinds of things. Would also dispatch order where the break men were to make switches between the cars. Each time they made a load between the communities they always tried to bring back some empties so there wasn't a lot duplicating. So that was part of his responsibility that the railway was making money through the whole thing and not making duplicate trips.

They did bring lumber down through the Forestville area as well as the agriculture industry of the fruits and harvests. He also had to report into other areas and let them know what the P&SR was doing and see how they managed and compared to bigger railroads and what they could do to improve their system. It was always a constant challenge of learning way to improve their system.

I: Was his responsibility to determine how large the trains where, did he make up how many cars there were?

BB: There was a limit as to what they could take. Many times they would be over the limit to take to Petaluma. So they would have to determine how many cars they would take down and take the rest down the next day. Of course if it was perishable fruit they would make it as quick as possible. Most of the times, I remember that seven cars was the number. And I remember he said well we've got our seven and that's it for now. So I'm thinking seven loaded cars was the capacity, plus the caboose.

I: Did they carry any cattle aboard?

BB: I don't recall any cattle.

I: But they did carry eggs?

BB: Eggs, but I don't think that was in Sebastopol. I don't think that was of importance, at least when I was around. Could have been earlier.

Grav was King in those days. So there was a big emphasis in those days to move the Gravs as quick as possible. As you know they are not known for their keeping qualities, so we tried to move them out as quick as possible to help them arrive in better condition at the market.

I: And the most of them went south to Petaluma and they were shipped aboard the steamer that day or night.

BB: Most of the fruits came from Forestville and Graton, of course Graton sent in a lot of cars because they had the canneries out there. Not too much from Santa Rosa, but they did send their berries, that's where most of the berries came from.

I: Do you remember prunes?

BB: I don't recall prunes from this area. They may have come from the Windsor area; maybe they were shipped by train or shipped.

I: The fruit, eggs, cherries, those were the main products coming out of the Sebastopol and Forestville area. There were quite a few canneries.

BB: Right along the train tracks. Barlows, Silvera & O'Connell, and in Graton the Pelletti Fruit Co. all of those places had track access right at their door.

I: So they would have their own spurs and have cars dripped off there in early June and then the cannery owner could fill the box cars up and then the next time the trains came by they would have the cars filled up.

BB: You mentioned earlier, the main place in Sebastopol for eggs to be picked up was the Sebastopol Poultry Producers, which was on the road to Santa Rosa on the left side. I guess where you would say where the movie theatre is. They also had a spur where the trains would come in and pick up the eggs. I don't know how long that was before I was a kid but it was there when I was growing up. They would always have a car there.

I: Were there any Chinese people when you were a kid?

BB: There were Chinese people and that was China Town area just past the poultry producers to the east. And then China Town also bordered Petaluma Avenue in back of Pellini's. The Chinese worked in a lot of the area at the poultry plant and when needed in the railroad helpers. To load and unload trains. A pretty nice Chinese development when I was about 5 -10 years of age. And somewhere got lost and disappeared through the years. I have some good memories of some of the Chinese merchants down there. Fong Lee had a Chinese mini mart. He had marvelous Chinese candy, so all the kids remembered him. A very nice, kind man, always had free samples to pass out. Had an immaculate store, wood floors and big wood kegs all around. Everyone seems to like him, a very popular gentleman.

I: that's interesting because that's the one article that was done in 1980 and featured your dad and interviewed your dad. It also touched on another aspect of the Chinese and that was the Chinese lottery. Your father said that they sold tickets and held the lottery on the train with the customers. It was a way to raise some income.

BB: That was certainly before my time, but I do have some good memories of the Chinese element down there.

I: Getting back to the train, as the P&SR, did the freight service continue through the depression.

BB: It was going full steam, because all through my grammar school years I would take my dad his lunch down there every Saturday night on my bicycle. Give it to him there and hop on the caboose and ride with him down to Petaluma and come back by car with him because he drove down there to start because he was a brakeman. And drive back and pick up my bike and go on home. We lived on Petaluma Avenue at the time and was only a couple blocks from the railroad. So I was the envy of all the kids in my class because every Saturday night I could, if I wanted to, ride down to Petaluma and back on the caboose. And it was a great experience, I loved it. Climbed up on the upstairs bench and stick your head out window and see all this beautiful countryside. And wave to people along the way.

I: Did they use a horn or bell at that time.

BB: Yes, they used both. They had a horn that blew constantly if there was any crossroad or any cattle were out. Then they had a kind of bell for when they came into a station they would ring for some reason. I don't recall the reason they used the bell. But the horn was loud and clear in fact you could hear it when it was approaching Sebastopol from Santa Rosa, so that was my clue to get on my bike and go running down there and make connections. Because if I didn't make my connection they wouldn't stand around waiting for me. My dad needed his dinner, so I had to get down there with it.

I: Would did you have any idea about the speed of the trains?

BB: It didn't go very fast, maybe 15-20 mph and then when it got up to speed in the open area it probably got up to maybe 35 mph. When they were in towns it was very slow and you could get very impatient and wanted to get going. Going down Main Street it was very slow, but so as it got out side of town it would pick up speed.

I: Do you have a rough idea about how many people used the passenger service?

BB: No, because the passenger service was out by the time I would remember. I don't think there were every more than 50 people in the area. I remember my dad said he knew every person by name and most of the time I doubt there was more than 50 because most of them were just coming into town

to go to school. I can tell you exactly how many people were on it when they were hauling agriculture products to Petaluma. I know that part of it.

I: Did the train have separate stops for freight and other stops for passengers?

BB: Yes, there were different stations. One stop in Graton and Forestville had two, Sebastopol they would stop about 3-4 places because there were several canneries. They had spurs at those canneries. Then Brown and Furushio Bros., all those places they would stop and picked up cars. Furushio was south of Sebastopol, at the edge of Petaluma Avenue in the flat area there was a spur for that.

I: Near the hospital?

BB: Yes, but in the flat.

I: I can't think of too many more questions, you've been really great. One of the things that Ross Yeager mentioned was that they had the hill out in Forestville before you get to Forestville and that the trainmen would hate to stop on the Harbine Hill because half way up they would have to stop and it would be hard to get the traction up again. So they would hope that the student was sick or that they would take the train from Forestville.

BB: In fact some of the people my dad would talk about, the steady passengers, one of the ladies just passed away recently. She would ride the train as a passenger was Mary Trigiero, a longtime Sebastopol family. Mary was a single lady and rode it all the time that it was in the passenger service. She and my parents were life long friends. Her brother, Ed Trigiero, was also a local history buff of Sebastopol.

Did Ross Yeager give you the names of any of the trainmen?

I: Yes, he mentioned Bert Vale, Clyde Berry.

BB: There are three other that I remember very well. One was Ray Thompson and Jocko Williams and Wayne Williams. My dad of course worked with them first as a brakeman and then as a conductor and then into the trainmaster position. When he went into the trainmaster position he worked with Bruce Kirpatrick, Kent Stefanoni, Bud Parks, Russ Michaelson.

I: I'll try to look up those names. I know that Earl Carrillo mentioned a judge, I think his name was McCormick who was involved with the train. There was a tragedy and he lost his legs. He apparently serviced the accident then became a judge.

BB: I remember hearing of that, but it was before my time. My dad was also the first constable in Sebastopol. So he had a lot of connections. The early days of Sebastopol, when the sidewalks were still wooden and those kind of things. Between him and all the guys I listened to while I was riding the train on Saturday night so quite a lot of stories to reminisce about.

I: I'm sure they had a lot of close calls.

BB: I can remember my dad one of the things that would irritate them the most was when peoples cows would get out on the road and they would have to totally stop the trains, get out themselves and get the cattle out of the way and then get back in again and go off. That would delay them 20 minutes.

I personally miss the trains. I was one of the saddest people in Sebastopol to see the train track disappear. It was a sad situation. And when they took it out all the way up to Forestville, I just lost all hope of saving it. See the Salomon's were out there on the route and they were doing everything they could. It ran right along their very valuable property out there, but they were delighted to have it there. And they put in quite a lot of money to keep the train going. But it didn't work. They still feel very strongly about having the train a part of history.

I: It is a very sad thing. And this book I have that was written in 1956, it talks about the P&SR and mentions that it was a very well run and during it's operation they made a profit.

BB: Most of the men were pretty dedicated to it, they liked their jobs and were part of an era that took pride in their work and wanted to things going.

I: The hours that the men had to keep. I read an article that said a gentleman had to go to work at 3:30 a.m. and it was common that they put in 13-14 hours a day.

BB: By the way, they didn't get over time either. It was straight pay. I remember my dad talking about that, in his later years when he was in the office the employees that were still on the railroad were getting overtime. But when he was a brakeman they didn't know what overtime was. They just worked because there was work to be done.

I: I'm sure loading and unloading those cars.

BB: Besides the worked connected to loading and unloading they had to keep the train in good repair. So the brakeman had to have quite a bit of knowledge of what made the train work or not work. It wasn't just one job and it was a lot of jobs.

I remember working at the canneries, it was a matter of desperation situation if you couldn't get enough cars to your cannery or to your packinghouse because your fruit would have to set overnight or something. So there would be a frantic call, can't we get another car? The railroad was a vital part of making a lot of people making a living. A lot of people in the Sebastopol, Graton, Forestville, Santa Rosa area that would be affected.

I: I want to thank you Mrs. Bertoli and if there is any more memories, pictures or documents that we could talk copies of we would certainly appreciate it.

BB: When is your ?

I: It's going to be up in a few weeks, the last couple of weeks. Luther Burbank is going to last through the 10th. Between the 9th and 10th they're going to be taking down the Luther Burbank and we'll be putting up in the next few weeks.

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